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Folk Medicine In Eighteenth Century Wales

Glyn Penrhyn Jones

It must be evident that the traditional medicinal customs and rituals of pre-industrial society have little in common with the technological complexities of scientific medicine and are acknowledged to be the proper field of study of the folklorist and anthropologist and even the social historian. The advent of clinical objectivity has inevitably resulted in the recession of primitive concepts of disease processes, of sympathetic and magical medications; the intricate nostrums and comprehensive panaceas of the ancient authorities are clearly irrelevant in a modern medical practice which is characterized more and more by sophisticated techniques – symbolized perhaps by the modern computer, by the revolution in molecular biology, and by the current clamours of transplant surgery.

Nevertheless, ancient customs die hard and medicine is certainly no embodiment of dispassionate orthodoxy. Hoary ritualistic practices have not all been swept away by the scientific juggernaut. The eighteenth century may have been the last period when folk medicine was of any great consequence here, but the folk medicine of twentieth century Wales still offers a rich field of research. Some of the features of pre-scientific and even pre-Christian cultures can be recognised in certain methods of combating disease in Wales today – in common with the other countries of the Western World. Geographical factors and the principle of peripheral survival probably account for the endurance of some traditional attitudes and beliefs with regard to health, sickness and death.

The primitive idea of disease as a supernatural force, demoniac in essence, to be exorcised and eliminated, is reflected in many current therapeutic habits. Ritual catharsis with laxatives and purges is quite extensive, and even in modern hospital practice the daily cycle of remedy and result seems to achieve the status of a hallowed ceremonial. An uncritical attitude to medicaments in general is still widespread, and this sanguine expectancy of the superlative elixir fosters habitual medication, abuse, and addiction. The *pro rata* costs of prescriptions in general practice in Caernarvonshire have been the highest in Wales since 1911 – except for one year when Anglesey achieved this doubtful pride and place.

Folk medicine in eighteenth century Wales may have been widespread, it was certainly far less expensive than the folk medicine of twentieth century Wales. The pharmaceutical section of the National Health Service costs the taxpayer some £100 million per annum; a goodly proportion of this is accounted for by routine medication of very doubtful value and which is essentially ritualistic medicine. Cough medicines are imbibed by the gallon, yet scientific assessments suggest that they have little value; most vitamin preparations are superfluous; the majority of tonics are virtually valueless; expensive preparations of such elements as iron are unnecessary, and the ingestion of tranquillisers is now little more than a national cult.

The uncritical acceptance of sundry medicaments as distillations of the *elixir vitae* has led to pernicious physical consequences, so that the management of the side effects of routine remedies now constitutes a substantial part of medical care. Analgesic nephropathy, a

serious kidney disease following long continued abuse of codeine compounds, is a well recognised medical hazard in Switzerland, Denmark and Australia and in some parts of Britain such as North East Scotland.¹ Quite frequently one sees a brisk gastric haemorrhage resulting from the injudicious use of aspirin, which is, of course, universally employed as a sort of folk remedy.

The rush of new drugs and misplaced faith in their efficacy, often based on subtle advertising techniques using appeals to primitive instincts, has made drug toxicity almost a new branch of medicine. It is no wonder that a recently published medical book is entitled 'Diseases of Medical Progress' when it is recalled that approximately ten per cent of all hospital patients in these islands are in hospital largely as a result of medical treatment.

Folk-life studies may shed some light on the disparity in the indications for tonsil operations; a child in Bournemouth is six times more likely to have had his tonsils removed than his contemporary school-entrant in Bootle. It cannot all be for financial considerations since school-entrants in East Ham are fifty-one times more likely to have had their tonsils removed than those in Merthyr Tydfil and thirty-two times more likely than those in St Helens. The boys who have had their tonsils removed are far more likely to have been circumcised as well; ritual operations are certainly not extinct. This may be of some importance when tonsillectomies cost the British taxpayer £3 million per annum. (The American figure is about £60 million per annum.)²

Ritualistic practices persist in modern dietary instructions for certain diseases, in quick recourse to bed care on the slightest pretext, especially with children, in the washing of beds and lockers after deaths in hospital, and in the inordinate regard for cold fresh air. Ritualistic fears may underlie the current opposition to the fluoridation of water – similar instinctive antipathies occurred when vaccination was introduced, as well as the eradication measures for malaria.

All these factors indicate that the essence of folk medicine is still very much with us, though not perhaps in as overt a form as in the eighteenth century. A proper perspective is therefore necessary before embarking on a discourse on this subject, so that our appraisal be duly tempered with modesty.

Unorthodox medical practice was widespread in Wales in the eighteenth century and was often, as in most pre-industrial societies, the first, and even the only, resort of the sick. But there existed a hierarchical system in medicine, although admittedly there was little to choose in ability or dexterity between the on high and the baser purveyors of magical motleys. Licences to practise medicine were issued by the Royal College of Physicians of London, and the Universities of England and Scotland and the Continent bestowed

1. PRESCOTT, L. F., *Lancet* (1966) 2. 1143.

2. ILLINGWORTH, R. S., *Proc. roy. Soc. Med.* (1961) 54. 393.

degrees in medicine following courses of instruction that had little relevance to the practicalities of diagnosing and healing diseases. Few eighteenth-century Welsh medical graduates or licentiates returned to their native heath, but the handful who came home indulged freely in what was no less than unadulterated mumpsimus (*Mumpsimus* – a traditional custom, obstinately adhered to however unreasonable it may be. O.E.D.).³

The separation of the surgeons from the barbers in 1745 resulted in improved standards of surgery, and in general the status of the country surgeon by the mid-century was higher than that of the apothecary, although the apprenticeship system for surgeons was not as well supervised as that for apothecaries. Much of the general medical care rested with the apothecary, who usually served a seven-year apprenticeship in his trade, and although an examination in proficiency was not obligatory it was usual for the Society of Apothecaries to issue licences to practise.⁴

In 1704 the House of Lords had decided in favour of the Society to the effect that an apothecary could, without the advice of a physician, prescribe medicine to a sick patient who sought his help. The apothecary was not allowed to charge for the advice he gave, but only for the medicine compounded; this could well be the reason for the habitual expectation of medicine which still bedevils general medical practice here today.⁵

From 1774 the Society limited its livery to those who were practising apothecaries, meaning *bona fide* practitioners and not those who merely kept pharmacies. This, together with the act of 1785, caused dismay to a number of Welsh practitioners who were unregistered and unindentured. William Jones of Llangadfan who practised medicine as an unregistered practitioner in rural Montgomeryshire in the last quarter of the eighteenth century was greatly embittered by these regulations. In 1794 he wrote perceptively

‘Our country apothecaries think themselves in the *ne plus ultra* of medical science; and plume themselves on their dignity of being licenced, of having been at sea, and hearing lectures. As for my part, I think the art still in its infancy; there remains yet many absurd notions in the practice, and no great progress has been made in the prevention and cure of contagious and chronic diseases . . . But as a contrast to our present ignorance in the art of healing, we can hardly form an idea of the ultimate perfection to which it may arrive, at a future period. . . .’⁶

This rural practitioner and his kind, together with the apothecary-surgeons, form the bulk of the eighteenth-century doctors in Wales, although in their mode of practice they can hardly be delineated at times from the polymath, such as Lewis Morris or Iolo Morganwg, who encompassed medicine within his ranging intellectual interests, or the

3. FORBES, J. R., *Lancet* (1946) 2. 293.

4. FRANKLIN, A. W., *Brit. med. J.* (1953) 1. 966; Marshall, Dorothy, *English People in the Eighteenth Century* (London 1956) p. 134.

5. COPE, ZACHARY, *Brit. med. J.* (1956) 1. 2.

6. *The Cambrian Register* (London 1795-6) p. 244.

good lady of the household who relied on her compendium of domestic remedies, or even from the wise woman or local astrologer who mobilized the aid of less humdrum agencies.

As in all other peasant societies there existed in Wales a long tradition of magic and religion in the practice of the healing art, and the rites and rituals of the *dyn hysbys* – the prototype Welsh wizard – flourished during the eighteenth century. Indeed the national credulity seems to have been particularly heightened here at that time, some notable frauds having been then perpetrated with ease. Such medical magicians directed their supernatural powers not only to the alleviation of suffering, but were also ready to invoke their talents to help the farmer and his flock, to forecast the weather and to prognosticate about the future in general. Such divinations form the basis of the popular almanacs which survived in Wales from those of Thomas Jones of Shrewsbury in the seventeenth century to those of Robert Roberts of Holyhead in the twentieth, giving medical advice, astrological prophecies and weather lore.

Eighteenth-century Welsh magicians of this ilk such as William Augustus, Wil Awst, of Llanymddyfri, had some illustrious predecessors. John Dee, the sixteenth-century Welsh astrologer not only advised the Queen on her future plans, but also attended her in medical consultation with no less a dignitary than the Oxford Regius Professor of Physic. Arise Evans, the seventeenth-century Welsh astrologer, achieved a position of some influence with both the Royalists and the Parliamentarians, and he was summoned to treat Charles II for a tumour on his nose.⁷

But the eighteenth-century Welsh medical magicians moved in less exalted and influential circles, combining their singular crafts with a mundane employment. Huw Llwyd o Gynfal in Merioneth in the preceding century had been a soldier and a huntsman as well as an astrologer and folk physician. Cadwaladr Davies of Llany Cil in the eighteenth century was a medical astrologer who earned his living as a schoolmaster. The majority were farmers, the most notable, or notorious, being the Harrieses, who farmed Pant Coy, Cwrt y Cadno, in Carmarthenshire. This family had been known for years as dabblers in sorcery and clairvoyance and during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries their small farm became a medical and magical mecca. Their doyen was Harri Shôn Harri – his name later to be unhappily anglicised to Harry Jones – but it was his son, John Harries, and his grandson, Henry Harries (*d.* 1862) who made Cwrt y Cadno something of a lesser Lourdes.⁸

Combining wizardry, astrology and domestic medicine, John and Henry Harries, who had received a marginally wider education than their forbears, amassed a small library of the chief medical books of the period, but from the internal evidence of their manuscripts in the National Library they seem to have been hardly more than unlettered

7. *Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig*. (Llundain 1954) t. 204.

8. *ibid* tt. 317-8.

charlatans. In the tradition of astrological quackery their notebooks are full of cabalistic symbols and incantations together with a smattering of the galvanism that their contemporary, James Graham, had exploited as a magical remedy in his Temple of Health in Edinburgh.⁹

Those seeking consultation with the Harries family were subjected to a ritual which seems to be fairly standard for medical magicians – I witnessed a similar ceremony some fifteen years ago in the house of a local *dyn hysbys* at Llanllechid in the Ogwen Valley. This performance has been widely recorded and one American writer commented ‘over and over again . . . we find reference to the use by the practitioners [of folk medicine] of a “special” or “secret book” and apparently the most famous of them was “The Egyptian Secrets or Black and White Art for Man and Beast” by Alberto Magnus, Bishop of Ratisbon in the thirteenth century’.¹⁰

In the Welsh periodical *Y Genhinen* in 1896, in an article referring to Harries Cwrt y Cadno (lightly disguised as Huws, Cwrt y Ffwlbart) the author sets the scene (*trans.*):

‘The magician with the pomp and ceremony appropriate to a high court judge obtained his “Big Book” and brought it to the table in the centre of the room with great circum-spection and with the dignity appropriate to his status. This substantial volume is bound in iron and has locks of iron on it. . . .’

On the presentation of this tome, the magician avowed that (1) its contents are sacred, and that (2) it has been the property of the family for generations. No medical advice would be offered until the appropriate section of the great book had been consulted and the client having given his firm promise not to divulge the information to anyone.¹¹

Piser Sioned, the miscellany of the schoolmaster Cadwaladr Davies, is preserved in the College Library in Bangor; it was apparently compiled between 1733 and 1745, and its contents in general reflect the practices of contemporary lay healers and magicians. The bulk of the book consists of magical recipes culled from popular herbals, a few of them barbarous and revolting in the medicinal fashion of the period; it includes astrological dicta and, characteristically, the ubiquitous signs of the Zodiac in relation to diseases. Some recipes are amusing, some surprising, such as the advice on how to walk barefoot on the edge of a sword – ‘wash the feet first with pimperl water’, – ‘*di gerddi’n ddiberygl*’, ‘you will walk safely’. It is noteworthy that the remedy for epilepsy in this book is identical with those in at least three medieval Welsh herbals.¹²

9. NLW *Cwrtmawr* MSS 97, 672. Aberystwyth.
10. JONES, L. C., *Bull. Inst. Hist. Med.* (1949) 23. 494.
11. *Y Genhinen* (1896) p. 63; Peate, I. C. *Diwylliant Gwerin Cymru* (Liverpool 1943) t. 84.
12. Bangor MS 3212 ff 181, 191.

These allegedly magical powers, being familial, were guarded by kith and kin, so that certain localities became associated with unorthodox medical practices. At Llangatwg in South Wales, the Griffith family became locally esteemed at the end of the eighteenth century for their traditional skills in curing jaundice by enchantment. In the early years of the century Lodwick William was an acknowledged medical astrologer and bone-setter in the neighbourhood of Llandybie in Carmarthenshire. He was also the author of an interlude (*Sherlyn Benchwiban*) a riotous and coarse farce in which one apothecary, a Dr Moody, is depicted – possibly for ulterior professional purposes – as a particularly bawdy character. Associated with Lodwick William in his nefarious practices was Anthony William Rhys Dafydd of Gelliwastad in the same parish.¹³

A number of medical magicians flourished in eighteenth-century Montgomeryshire, the best known being William Savage of Troed y Lon, Llangurig, a farmer and gunsmith as well as an acclaimed healer; the magical propensity apparently remained in his family, with his grandson being a popular practitioner of the art in the late nineteenth century. Some accorded Savage's brother-in-law, John Morgan, also of Llangurig, an equal magical status to the omniscients of Cwrt y Cadno. One of John Morgan's family, Evan Griffiths of Pant y Benni, was similarly esteemed in the locality, and an orthodox medical descendant who practised recently at Ponterwyd in Cardiganshire was said to have been endowed with the hereditary healing gift.¹⁴

These powers were, of course, hardly more than unadulterated sorcery and black magic. A Daniel Jones of Llanafan Fawr was prosecuted for such activities at Brecon Assizes in 1789, and one John Jones, a late eighteenth-century magician in the Vale of Neath, was imprisoned in Cardiff for his beliefs in the occult. His recantation was followed by his release.¹⁵

Many of the superstitious rites of medical astrologers and the like included the use of talismans, charms, and amulets to ward off or exorcise the evil of disease. Interestingly enough the written charms, a number of which survived as practical propositions well into the nineteenth century, were either penned in English or Latin, very few in Welsh, even among the overwhelmingly Welsh-speaking population of that time; evidently the Welsh peasant could not bring himself to mollify the hordes of hell in the language of heaven!

Charms against ague were common when 'ague' meant any episode of rigor and fever. Charms were also used to allay the condition known in the eighteenth century as *clefyd y galon a'r ysgyfaint* – 'disease of the heart and lungs' – possibly pleuritic pain. A commonly

13. PHILLIPS, D. RHYS, *The History of the Vale of Neath*. (Swansea 1925). p. 606; ROBERTS, G. M. *Hanes Plwyf Llandybie*. (Cardiff 1939). tt. 226, 285.

14. HAMER, E. and LLOYD, H. W., *History of the Parish of Llangurig* (London 1895), p. 114; ISAAC, E., *Coelion Cymru*. (Aberystwyth 1938). t. 138.

15. PHILLIPS, D. RHYS, *op. cit.* pp. 582-3.

used charm or incantation for a sty on the eyelid was *cyfrif llyfrithen* – counting up to nine and back in one breath; another variant of this was to rub a gold ring to and fro under the eye nine times.¹⁶

White stone cults were extensive in eighteenth-century Wales, as in other Western pastoral societies of the period, and were often associated with pilgrimages to holy wells and other places of veneration. Recent excavations at Ffynnon Degla in Denbighshire revealed a layer of earth above a substantial aggregation of white stones, the earth containing eighteenth-century coins. The water of Ffynnon Degla was supposed to be particularly efficacious for epilepsy (*clwy Tegla*), a white stone being dropped into the well before the epileptic drank the water. Thomas Pennant in the 1770's witnessed pagan rites being enacted at Gwern Degla and at the nearby church, again for the purpose of curing epilepsy.¹⁷

White stones were supposedly efficacious also in the cure of rabies following mad dog bites; the much feared true rabies was probably quite uncommon but a pseudo-hydrophobia following the bite of a vicious dog occurred not infrequently. White stones with some magical virtue against such terrors were eagerly sought and the scrapings from such stones were administered as anti-rabid agents up to a century ago. Both the Lledrod hydrophobia stone in Cardiganshire and the Gilfachwen hydrophobia stone in Carmarthenshire were held in great regard. They consisted of white alabaster and it seems that they originated from medieval effigies, hence their alleged supernatural powers. It seems that the Henllan stone scrapings of pink alabaster had to be mixed with white alabaster for effectiveness.

The so-called 'adder stones' were also a popular remedy for 'web on the eye', presumably a chronic infection similar to trachoma; the Glain y Nadredd of Twyn y Tyle, Caerleon, and of Llangynwyd, Glamorgan, have survived. Edward Lhuyd, writing from Linlithgow in 1699, mentioned that he had seen Scottish, Irish and Welsh specimens of such adder stones being used as amulets and charms; this he bluntly dismissed as *celfyddyd fferyllt* (magician's art) and added 'not only the vulgar, but even gentlemen of good education throughout all Scotland are fully persuaded the snakes make them, though they are as plain glass as in any bottle'.¹⁸

The practice of herbal medicine in eighteenth-century Wales was little removed from astrological botany and traditional lore. Indeed the differentiation of the herbals of that period from indigenous folk remedies is merely a matter of degree, and it was not until the latter years of the century that a semblance of order and reason emerged from the therapeutic paraphernalia to become eventually systematic modern pharmacology.

16. PARRY-WILLIAMS, T. H., *Llawysgrif Richard Morris o Gerddi* (Cardiff 1931). t. 181; PEATE, I. C., *op. cit.* t. 85.

17. JONES, G. PENRHYN, (1957) M.A. Thesis (unpubld) p. 236. Liverpool.

18. GUNTHER, R. T., *Life and Letters of Edward Lhuyd*. (London 1945). pp. 423-4.

In a resurgence of herbal medicine in Wales in the eighteenth century several copies of late medieval Welsh herbals were made and presumably put to use. A significant number of humanist scholars in sixteenth-century Wales had been practising physicians as well as grammarians and lexicographers, and William Salesbury, the original translator of the New Testament into Welsh, had compiled a Welsh herbal-botanologium about 1570 from the well-known herbals of William Turner, Fuchs and Lobel. Although the original manuscript was lost, a copy made by a contemporary in 1597 was for a time in the possession of Thomas Wiliems of Trefriw, an ecclesiastic with strong inclinations to lexicography and herbal medicine, and it was this that by 1763 was in the hands of Evan Thomas of Cwmhwylfod near Bala and who made an inaccurate and incomplete transcription. This defective version was edited and published in 1916. (The 1597 transcription has since come to light.) Thomas was evidently one of the numerous eighteenth-century country quacks who dabbled in astrology and herbalism; one of his manuscripts in the National Library alludes not only to traditional magical medications but also to some of the popular contemporary astrological works, namely Richard Ball's 'Astro-physical Compendium', Henry Ceely's 'The Whole Key to Astrology', and Eland's 'Tutor to Astrology'.¹⁹

The late fourteenth-century compilation of herbal and magical remedies ascribed to the twelfth-century Physicians of Myddfai was also of interest to a number of Welsh herbalists and bibliophiles in the eighteenth century. When Edward Lhuyd and David Parry visited Thomas Wilkins in Glamorgan in 1697 Parry copied some of the contents of a medical manuscript in his possession – the one that eventually became Jesus College I, the Red Book version of *Meddygon Myddfai*. It was probably from this manuscript that Iaco ab Dewi made his transcript in 1713. Edward Lhuyd himself may have copied some of the contents of this herbal, as well as another of Lhuyd's coterie of scholars, Moses Williams.²⁰

Later in the century both the polymath Thomas Beynon of Greenmeadow, Carmarthen-shire, and the quack William Bona of Llanpumsaint in the same county transcribed the *Meddygon Myddfai* herbal – and both versions were used by Paul Diverres in his 1913 French edition of *Meddygon Myddfai*. It is worth recalling that the perverse genius Iolo Morganwg also had a hand in all this. It seems that William Bona copied the Iaco ab Dewi version about 1743; in 1801 Iolo, writing from Carmarthen, stated:

'There is an old man within 15 miles of this place that practices physic and has a Manuscript on physic attributed to Meddygon Myddfai, it is pretty old and differs totally from anything under the Title that I ever saw . . . it is the only medical book the old fellow has, and is his oracle. . . .'²¹

19. JONES, G. PENRHYN, *Trans. Denb. Hist. Soc.* 8. 53 (1959); NLW. MSS 2281, 6735.

20. WILLIAMS, G. J., *Traddodiad Llenyddol Morgannwg*, (Cardiff 1948), t. 163. HUGHES, GARFIELD, *Iaco ab Dewi* (Cardiff 1953). t. 53.

21. WILLIAMS, G. J., *Llên Cymru* (1951), 1. 172.

This could be William Bona as a very old man or his brother Thomas, himself an unorthodox country practitioner. Whether Iolo did in fact copy that version of *Meddygon Myddfai* is now very doubtful, and, according to Professor G. J. Williams, he seems merely to have elaborated a herbal compiled by one Harri John of Pontypool, attributing it to the ancient Physicians of Myddfai. The second half of the 1861 version of *Meddygon Myddfai* is therefore a late-eighteenth-century forgery. It is noteworthy that the Iolo copy includes, for example, a remedy for pain using the well-known herbal mixture of parsley and white wine – a recipe that is recommended also in the Salesbury Herbal, Culpepper's Herbal (1649) and Hafod MS 16 (a Welsh medical manuscript of *circa* 1400). Parsley was considered to have a particular effect on kidney and uterine flow.

The interesting association of lexicography, botany and herbalism can be traced from Salesbury and Wiliems in the sixteenth century to Dr John Davies in seventeenth, and to the lexicographers Siôn Rhydderch and Thomas Richards and Hugh Davies, the botanologist, in the eighteenth century.

Rhydderch's Welsh grammar, published in 1728, contained a vocabulary of plant names, in the compilation of which he was apparently assisted by Richard Evans a mid-eighteenth-century Anglesey apothecary-surgeon. Richards's dictionary of 1753, revised as late as 1790, contained a 'Botanology' and was based on John Davies's *Antiquae Linguae Britannicae* (1621) and *Dictionarum Duplex* (1632). Part of Davies's latter work was a shortened version of Thomas Wiliems's dictionary and herbal. Hence the propinquity of a grammar and a botanical index in Thomas Richards's work – a connexion which can be traced back to Renaissance scholars and forward to modern Welsh dictionaries.

Hugh Davies's 'Botanology', which appeared in 1813, was initiated when the author was the incumbent of the parishes of Llandegfan in Anglesey and Aber in Caernarvonshire at the end of the eighteenth century, and he relied on *Meddygon Myddfai*, Culpepper's Herbal and William Morris's manuscript 'A Collection of Plants gathered in Anglesey'. His aim was a systematic classification of plants in Wales, and in the manner of his herbalist predecessors he wrote '... to each species, most remarkable for its qualities, either economical or medicinal, is subjoined an account of its uses or virtues, with the manner of preparing it, and the proper dose, all taken from the best writers on those subjects; and this is intended particularly for the use and relief of such of my countrymen as are so distantly situated, or so circumstanced, as not to be able, on every occasion, to apply to professional men'.²² (This statement is strictly comparable to that made by Humphrey Llwyd, a contemporary of Salesbury's in the sixteenth century, and a physician by profession, who in the introduction to his posthumously published 'Treasury of Health' (1585) stated that the book was intended 'for such honest persons as will moderately and

22. DAVIES, H., *Welsh Botany* (1813). xiv. London.

sincerely (either in time or necessity when no learned physician is at hand) manifest the things herein contained and go about the practice thereof.’²³)

This botanology was therefore a modified medical herbal. Davies was well aware of the writings of William Withering, the contemporary physician who was associated with the development of digitalis from a folk remedy, he had assisted Pennant with his ‘Indian Zoology’ and he had corresponded with and assisted Sir J. E. Smith, a physician and botanist of great repute. Davies’s ‘Botanology’ is a work of some scholarship and only broadly comparable with the popular household herbals which were in great demand in the eighteenth century for the treatment of minor ailments.²⁴

Among the number of extant volumes of domestic remedies of this kind is a Welsh manuscript in the Bangor College Library (dated 1803) in the hand of William Williams, Llandegai, a Penrhyn Quarry official and author of ‘Observations on the Snowdon Mountains’. This herbal was completely plagiarised and published by one Thomas Parry some years later. William Williams has a typical introductory vindication which, in translation, reads:

‘The Welsh physick, and the words of the art, that was practised by the Ancient Britons has been completely neglected and forgotten, and the art has since been clothed in English, and if a Welshman seeks health he has to go to an Englishman, or one brought up in English ways for that felicity . . . and if one dares to seek the ancient means that gave health and long life to our ancestors, the English physicians dub him an empiric or quack – terms of spite fashioned by them to denigrate those that by nature, as of old, understand the virtues of plants . . .’²⁵

Despite such protestations however, it is clear that most herbals and collections of folk remedies were virtually useless in the manner prescribed. They contained universal remedies and specifics, in unguents, distillations and electuaries, sometimes in absurdly complex forms; a few were palpably dangerous, many fantastic – from ‘the hair of the dog that bit you’, to roasted moles, the new milk of a red cow, snake skin jelly, and the powdered eyes of crabs. Sufficient perhaps to give one example – from the household book of the well-to-do Penrhos family of Anglesey at the end of the eighteenth century – a recipe for ‘wormes’ – ‘The first worme that comes upwards take and drie it and pound it into powder and take it in wine or tea what you like best’.²⁶

23. JONES, G. PENRHYN, *Proc. roy. Soc. Med.* (1956) 49. 522.

24. OWEN, T. J., *Trans. Ang. Antiq. Soc.* (1961) p. 39–52. *passim*; *Cymru*. 36. 234–6; CARTER, P. W., *Trans. Caern. Hist. Soc.* (1961) 17. 45.

25. Bangor MS 2634; *Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig. op. cit.* t. 1015.

26. Bangor Penrhos MS 1001.

But traditional medical lore and therapy were not confined, in the eighteenth century, to the part-time practitioners of the art, nor to the mothers, or rather the grandmothers, of the household; it was a free-for-all and among its most enthusiastic proponents here were eminent literati, ecclesiastics, as well as some accredited apothecaries.

In the early eighteenth century, largely through the influence of John Ray, and his 'Wisdom of God manifested in the Works of Creation' (1691) the physico-theologians and astro-theologians had a strong bearing on philosophical thought. Edward Lhuyd and later John Wesley were well acquainted with Ray's classic and Wesley's *vade mecum* 'Primitive Physick' of 1747 seems to reflect this influence. This book, which had far wider popularity than any other of Wesley's, was a compilation from various medical sources and is in fact little more than a domestic handbook of remedies, containing the characteristic sanguine epithets of quackery – this 'proven', that 'infallible'. Under the title *Y Prif Feddiginiaeth* it was translated to Welsh by John Evans of Bala, a foremost Methodist, and published in 1759. The majority of the recipes are characteristic of the folk therapies of the period, but the book is remarkable for a classic clinical picture of the then common condition of scurvy and for the effective remedy advised, using Seville oranges. James Lind's important treatise on scurvy had appeared six years previously.

The astro-theological influences, following William Derham, can be detected in the interests of other eighteenth-century Welsh Methodists, notably Williams Pantycelyn. Like Wesley and Howell Harris, Pantycelyn dabbled in medicine and often resorted to the popular volume of William Buchan's, 'Domestic Medicine'. He seems to have compounded remedies of his own, being in possession of a pestle and mortar. Another eighteenth-century Welsh Methodist of similar bent was Griffith Jones, Llanddowror; a hypochondriac himself, he dabbled in folk medicine, dispensed remedies to the poor, but who was thought by one of his fellow prelates to be 'as great a Quack in Physick as in Divinity'.²⁷ He certainly had faith in a notorious eighteenth century quack remedy for urinary stone, Joanna Stephen's Ball – a concoction for which she had induced Parliament to pay her £500 for disclosing its ingredients, one of which was an extract of garden snails.²⁸

The country parson had been required for many years to combine the duties of doctor and priest, endowed as he was with a degree of scholarship denied to the overwhelming majority of his flock. Henry Vaughan, the metaphysical poet, had practised herbal medicine in his rural parish in the Usk Valley in the seventeenth century; the spiritual and temporal ministrations of Robert Ffoulkes, Rector of Llanfair Dyffryn Clwyd a little later, were more suspect, and he may well have practised black magic.²⁹ A contem-

27. EVANS, J., *Some Account of the Welsh Charity Schools* . . . (London, 1752). p. 94.

28. CLEMENT, MARY, *Correspondence and Minutes of the S.P.C.K.* (Cardiff. 1952). pp. 190–1, 242.

29. NLW MS 836 ff 130–1.

porary, John Jones, who was Chancellor of Llandaff in 1690, was a licenciante of the Royal College of Physicians, but his book of 371 pages on 'The Mysteries of Opium Revealed' is so turgidly unintelligible that the author may well have been, like Iolo Morganwg, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas de Quincy a century later, himself an opium addict.

The tradition of doctoring and divinity occurred in Nonconformist Wales as well. Nathaniel Williams, a prominent eighteenth-century Carmarthenshire Baptist, produced in 1785 his *Darllen Dwfr a Meddyginiaeth* – a treatise on the medieval practice of uroscopy – the traditional and oracular ceremony when the attendant healer pontificated on the diagnostic value of the naked eye examination of the urine; it had little or no basis, but it became a stock-in-trade for many a folk practitioner.

A contemporary 'Scotch' Baptist in North Wales, J. R. Jones, Ramoth, Llanfrothen, practised a traditional form of medicine in rural Merioneth at the turn of the nineteenth century; 'in an area when no registered apothecary was available'. In a letter to James Watt of Glasgow in 1804 J. R. Jones wrote 'in the year 1788, I joined the Baptist Church at Ramoth, and I had some inclination before that time to the study of physic . . . I have not any secular employment to hinder me from that study; and what is still more, I have a strong inclination to the business, and particularly to obtain a copious knowledge of the British herbs.' His library included a manuscript of herbal remedies, books on domestic medicine, and, significantly, astrological tables.³⁰

This mass of lay medicine and such therapeutic procedures as randomly applied blisters and haphazard venesection – prescribed freely by both orthodox and unorthodox practitioners – could do little to contain the constant menace of contagious disease, the chief decimator of eighteenth-century Welsh society, and yet at times, by accident more than by design, an empiric concoction or primitive ritual may have saved lives. And indeed some practices have been vindicated, in retrospect, by being surprisingly effective despite their empiric beginnings.

One such ritual was the practice of variolation against the still rampant smallpox. This method had been practised for many centuries in various parts of the world and consisted of inoculating a person at risk from the disease with fluid from the blisters or pustules of a sufferer, the secondary infection being far less malign. In China the dried crusts from smallpox pustules were inserted in the nostrils on 'a lucky day', the ritual being known as 'sowing the smallpox'.³¹ Variolation by other methods was practised by the African Bantu until the twentieth century, and seems also to have been included in Indian-Brahmin cults.

30. WILLIAMS, D., *Cofiant J. R. Jones o Ramoth*. (Carmarthen 1913). tt. 690–1.

31. LAURANCE, B., *Lancet* (1955). 1. 764.

It is generally acknowledged that it was Dr Martin Lister, a friend and medical adviser to Edward Lhuyd, who first introduced the method to the medical profession in Britain about 1675. But it was Lady Mary Worley Montague, about 1717, who popularised the method of engrafting the disease from 'the best sort of Smallpox'. Nevertheless, variolation had been practised in Wales for many years. In 1722 Dr Perrot Williams of Haverfordwest communicated the following to the Royal Society:

'On the Method of procuring the Small Pox in South Wales . . . However new a method of communicating the Small Pox may appear in this Kingdom, yet it has been commonly practised by the inhabitants of Pembrokeshire in Wales, time out of mind, though by another name, viz. that of buying the disease, as I have been long since informed by several who procured the distemper by that means. There is a married woman in the neighbourhood of this place, who practised it on her daughter, about a year and a half since, by which means she had the small pox favourably and is now in perfect health, though she has ever since, without reserve, conversed with such as have had the distemper.

To procure the distemper they either rub the matter taken from the pustules when ripe, on several parts of the skin of the arms, etc. or prick those parts with pins, or the like, first infected with the same matter. And though they omit the necessary evacuations, such as purging etc. yet I am informed they generally come off all well enough; and I cannot hear of one instance of their having the small pox a second time.

One Mr Owen, a gentleman of this country, told me that above 20 years since, when at school, he and several of his schoolfellows infected themselves at the same time, from the same person, and not one of them miscarried. The method he used was this: having rubbed the skin off his left hand with the back of his penknife, till blood began to appear, he applied such variolous matter to that part; which by degrees, growing inflamed, about a week afterwards he fell into the small pox. I have since conversed with several others who made the like experience on themselves, 20 years since; but all positively affirm, that they never had the small pox a second time.'

Dr Perrot Williams enlarged on this rural ritual in another letter to the Royal Society in February, 1723, and shortly afterwards further evidence came from Richard Wright, a surgeon of Haverfordwest, referring to one William Allen of St Ishmaels who had died six months previously at the age of 90 and who had remembered the practice being performed during his childhood.³²

John Evans, who recorded several journeys in Wales in the late eighteenth century, had witnessed similar practices near Newport in South Wales; he remarked that the

'Inoculation for smallpox had been practised here time immemorial. . . . They call it buying the smallpox, as it is the custom to purchase the matter of those affected, as children do warts of each other.' He thought that the practice was 'a remnant of those useful arts taught to the Britons by the Romans and afterwards with many others, buried under the rubbish of ignorance and superstition: the custom originally came from Greece. . . .'

32. *Phil. Trans.* (1722). 32. 262-7.

There is also evidence that in the Scottish Highlands inoculation of this primitive kind had been practised before 'the Greek inoculation was tried in London'.³³

By the end of the eighteenth century, of course, vaccination had superseded variolation as an effective preventive against smallpox, vaccination itself having developed from a popular belief among West Country folk that cowpox victims were subsequently resistant to smallpox.

Edward Jenner's clinical application of vaccination is clearly comparable to William Withering's development, a few years earlier, of digitalis therapy for dropsy, when he discovered that this agent was the truly effective constituent of 'Old Mother Hutton's' concoction in rural Shropshire.³⁴ But such critical evaluations of rural rites and remedies were quite exceptional. Domestic therapy was essentially blunderbuss therapy, and the many proprietary preparations available were richly compounded – such as 'Dr James's Fever Powders', 'Dr Daffy's Cordial Elixir', 'Dr Anderson's True Scotch pills', 'Dr Collet's Balsam of Health' and the like. One or two, such as 'Dr Sydenham's Liquid Laudanum' were probably of real value, and, in particular, Jesuit's bark or Peruvian bark, an ancient Indian and South American remedy for ague, and which presumably reached Europe after the Spanish conquest. Jesuit's bark itself contains little quinine but it was usually adulterated with the more plentiful Cinchona bark and which contained quinine in quantity. It was this that proved effective when the ague so treated was true malaria. Eventually Cinchona bark supplanted Jesuit's bark altogether.³⁵

Malaria was endemic in eighteenth-century Wales, particularly in Cardiganshire, around Cors Fochno, and in the marshes of Anglesey. Known as *Yr Deirton Dridiau*, this tertian malaria caused rigor and fever on alternate days. The villagers of North Cardiganshire knew it as *Yr Hen Wrach*, and this old witch, so they thought, made periodic forays out of the marsh to grip her victims with a shaking sickness – this of course being the rigor of acute malaria.³⁶

Among the household remedies of the Penrhos family of Anglesey in the eighteenth century was the following for ague – 'Jesuit's bark, brown sugar, nutmeg, pepper, syrup of red poppies mixed together with aniseed water or brandy'. This essentially folk remedy became a common item in apothecaries' prescriptions for febrile episodes; in 1741 Lewis Morris of Anglesey complained that his friend, the apothecary Richard Evans, gave Peruvian bark for everything. (*Ni chae ganddo namyn y Cortex Peruvianus ym mhob rhith*.³⁷)

33. EVANS, J., *Letters written during a Tour through South Wales* (1804). p. 313. London; CREIGHTON, C., *A History of Epidemics in Great Britain* (Cambridge. 1894). (2 vols.) 2. 471.

34. WILLIUS, F. A., and DRY, T. J., *A History of the Heart and the Circulation*. (Philadelphia, 1948). p. 312.

35. GUTHRIE, D., *A History of Medicine*. (London 1945). p. 205.

36. MORGAN, R., *Cymru*. (1909). p. 198.

37. JONES, G. PENRHYN, *Newyn a Haint yng Nghymru*. (Caernarfon 1962). t. 127.

But in addition to this remedy, effective when properly used, malarial fever was commonly an indication for a brisk bleed – to rid the constitution of its vexatious humour. An episode in the well-documented life of Lewis Morris, a notable eighteenth century Welsh polymath, reflects the contemporary domestic measures for an attack of tertian malaria; on 9 March 1762, he wrote, '*Mi fum yn nyffryn cysgod angau Dduw Sul diwaethaf; nage nos Sadwrn*, [I was in the valley of the shadow of death last Sunday; no, Saturday night,] a second fit of ye ague caught me in bed, and in the cold fit I was like to go off, but my wife had the presence of mind to find out my lancets in my bureau, and got a man to cut one of my veins, which saved my life for that time however, for it gave me instant relief as they tell me, but I had lost my self and knew nothing of their operations for several hours afterwards. Monday night it caught me again in bed, after I had taken a preparatory vomit, and it shook me in a cold fit that I lay in bed almost all day yesterday, and today I am taking the bark, a very untoothsome affair. *Wfft iddo!*' [Curse it!]³⁸

By the end of the century, the heyday of the medically inclined polymath, the enchanter, the quack astrologer and the bone setter was really over, and particularly so after the registration of apothecaries in 1815 and the subsequent establishment of systematic medical education. Nevertheless, the concept of the familial healing genius, the therapeutic virtues of the laying on of hands, and all the trappings and mumbo-jumbo of primitive physic have left no little legacy. And it is doubtful whether even the most dedicated and desiccated clinical scientist will ever be rid of them; the magic will out, human nature being what it is. Moreover, on the other side of the coin, we should with modesty remember that several recently acclaimed remedies have been found to have no more value than 'Dr Daffy's Elixir'; for example it now appears that the hitherto greatly vaunted psychoanalytic sessions are as therapeutically sterile in practice as were ague charms, and indeed some medicaments have proved frankly disastrous. Some of today's heroic and heady clinical enthusiasts would do well to heed the *ex tempore* prayer made by an experienced physician some fifty years ago: 'From inability to leave well alone, from too much zeal for what is new and contempt for what is old, from putting knowledge before wisdom, service before art, cleverness before common sense, from treating patients as cases, and from making the care of the disease more grievous than its endurance, Good Lord, deliver us.'³⁹

38. DAVIES, J. H., (Ed), *The Letters of Lewis, Richard, William and John Morris . . . 1728–65*. (2 vols.) (Aberystwyth 1907–9). 2. 451.

39. HUTCHISON, SIR ROBERT, quoted by EVANS, W., *Brit. med. J.* (1962) 2. 724.